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ABSTRACT

The Minnesota Project on Ethnic America inaugurated an experimental program to explore the problems of a culturally diverse college population in a small setting. The program utilized techniques borrowed from related programs and reflects recent social sciences findings on the continued impact of the ethnic factor in American society. The project's Workshop on American Pluralism established a number of innovative precedents in the contemporary movement to make American education more responsive to the cultural needs and new assertiveness of minority groups in American society. This essay sketches the scope of this undertaking and, at the same time, places the program in both its historical context and philosophic framework. This program provides a small group experience for a selected cross-section of Americans from diverse ethnic, religious, regional, and social backgrounds. Ethnicity and other collective identities are assumed to be important factors that generate differences in attitude and outlook among Americans. Consistent with this fundamental assumption, the program aims to increase the number the range of cultural differences within each workshop group. Among the topics discussed are the following: the origins and forerunner of the Minnesota program, the importance of analyzing each individual's particular communication style, and the reexamination of the rules that come to govern different cultural groups. (Author/AM)

MODIFYING THE SMALL GROUP EXPERIENCE
FOR MULTI-CULTURAL AMERICA

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In July of 1973, the Minnesota Project on Ethnic America, a local affiliate of the American Jewish Committee's National Project on Ethnic America, inaugurated an experimental program to explore the problems of a culturally diverse college population in a small group setting. The program utilizes techniques borrowed from related programs and reflects recent social sciences findings on the continued impact of the ethnic factor in American society. The Project's "Workshop on American Pluralism" established a number of innovative precedents in the contemporary movement to make American education more responsive to the cultural needs and new assertiveness of minority groups in American society. This essay sketches the shape of this undertaking and, at the same time, places the program in both its historical context and philosophic framework.

The Minnesota program attempts to design a small group experience for a selected cross-section of Americans from diverse ethnic, religious, regional and social backgrounds. Ethnicity and other collective identities are assumed to be important factors that generate differences in attitude and outlook among Americans. Consistent with this fundamental assumption, the program aims to increase the number and broaden the range of cultural differences within each workshop group. It does this by placing participants in groups according to information provided on a screening questionnaire that had been distributed earlier. Each participant is asked to respond to the question: "How do you define yourself in cultural terms?" Responses varied greatly in length and emphasis: "Polish-American...southerner...middle-class American with special interest in Chicano culture...Japanese-American with slight consciousness of distinctive identity." To prevent the ethos or values of any one group from dominating the proceedings of the workshop, a representative sample of the varied cultural types found within American society was assigned to each group. The program does not rule out non-collective identifications. Members expressing a radically individual identity or adopting a more universal cultural stance are given proportionate representation in the group.

No precise formula, of course, can be devised for the proper distribution of individuals to each group and there are obvious disadvantages in reproducing the proportions of ethnic groups in the general population. Pipelines are expected to be extended to various ethnic, religious and cultural organiza-

tions in an effort to construct a broad recruitment base for the program. The danger of cohesive majorities controlling the workshop to advance their own interests is reduced by the selection procedure.

Although the program operates on the premise that group affiliation is a prime influence on individual behavior, it is not assumed that a presumed group pattern is inevitably expressed in a person's actions. The range of variations within particular groups is so great that generalizations are extremely difficult. Also, the lines of demarcation between groups are in such a constant state of flux, and intersections of multiple group memberships so frequent, that outside interpretations are fraught with the danger of distortion or error. Moreover, creative interaction between members of different groups is so common in our society that today's generalizations may be invalidated tomorrow through the on-going give and take of contact situations. For these reasons, it is recommended that the discussion of the group factor be initiated by the individuals involved rather than proceed from any preconceived understanding of the characteristics of particular groups.

ORIGINS AND FORERUNNERS OF THE MINNESOTA PROGRAM

The Minnesota program builds on precedents set by earlier programs that either demonstrated the effectiveness of relevant learning techniques or placed the cultural factor high on the docket of small group concerns. The Minnesota program incorporates innovations: the workshop technique and the group dynamics perspective.

Developed in the United States in the late thirties, the workshop movement considered the real-life problems as the proper focus for learning activity and recommended student self-direction in the choice of learning experiences. In the forties, Kurt Lewin and the staff of the National Training Laboratory at Bethel, Maine, pioneered the group dynamics movement. Perceiving the opportunities for creative learning and personal growth in the conscious analysis of group interactions, a set of techniques -- some of a controversial nature -- were developed to direct attention to communication patterns in a small group.

Both of these movements contributed important ideas to the Minnesota program. The belief that learning tends to be life-centered and lasting when students set their own pace and define the direction of their course of study was borrowed from the workshop movement. Consequently, the current program resists the temptation of setting up elaborate structures and instead allows participants to decide the form and content of each meeting.

The group dynamics movement provides the current program an appreciation for the learning potential built up through the

collective exploration of communication patterns and feeling tones within a small group. Accordingly, efforts are made to limit the number of participants and to concentrate on spontaneous occurrences as opposed to rehearsed curricular experiences.

In constructing the current program, the basic premise of the new pluralist movement was grafted on to these elements of theory and technique: that ancestral group identities shape individual attitudes and behavior. To develop a program consistent with this operating assumption, it is necessary to raise the cultural factor to the highest priority on the small group's agenda.

The Minnesota program is not the first to focus on the cultural identities of group participants. In the early forties, the Workshop for Cultural Democracy developed a small group method called "group conversation" to delve into the cultural background of participants through the collective recall of childhood memories. The director of the Workshop, Dr. Rachel Davis DuBois, believed that the cultural traditions brought to America from all over the world should be validated and preserved.¹ She and her associates welcomed cultural pluralism as a continuing feature of American society and argued that diversity made possible a creative interchange of customs and values enriching to the emerging civilization of the United States. Dr. DuBois tried to convince Americans that membership in minority groups was neither shameful nor transitory. In an age that valued outward conformity and super-patriotism, her message was a refreshing and challenging alternative to the prevailing orthodoxy. The program of the Workshop for Cultural Democracy, however, was restricted in application by the ideological imperative of proving the "brotherhood" postulate: beneath the surface variations of the American cultural landscape was a bedrock of uniform needs and attitudes. The program was further handicapped by a rather naive belief in the readiness of people to discard or borrow cultural traits in a conscious and deliberate fashion.

A team of human relations specialists began in the late sixties to experiment with group workshops to span the cultural frontiers drawn on the American campus as a result of the post-World War II influx of foreign students. The Intercultural Communication Workshops (ICWs) were developed to smooth the transition of the foreign student to the alien and bewildering milieu of the American university. A second goal was to enable American participants to explore the cultural bases of their beliefs and behavior through interaction with representatives of foreign cultures. A particularly fertile center for the dissemination of this approach was the Regional Council for International Education at the University of Pittsburgh. At last count, more than fifty American universities had formal programs of this type, usually under the auspices of the office of the foreign student adviser.

The ICW added greater depth and methodological sophistication to the DuBois strategy by adapting some of the techniques of the group dynamics movement. However, unlike the DuBois approach which sought to underscore cultural variations on the American scene, the theorists and activists of the ICW movement were often remiss in not considering culture a significant variable among the American participants in the group.² Ethnic, racial, regional and class differentiations between Americans were ignored, ostensibly to better present a mainstream American culture in sharp contrast to the cultures of the rest of the world.

LIMITS TO THE CURRENT TOLERANCE

Despite the pretense to universal embrace in the DuBois and ICW programs, they rested on a cluster of culturally-rooted assumptions that compromised the goal of universality and disenchanted many of those who hoped for an atmosphere of genuine cultural objectivity. A fundamental bias built into these programs is the belief in the interchangeability of the cultural elements brought to each workshop group. To rationalize the coercive aspect of the proceedings, this view holds that individuals can detach or liberate themselves from their cultural moorings, take a careful look at their relevance and worth, and fashion an eclectic reordering and synthesis of the desirable elements. In Dr. DuBois' thinking, people are capable of "consciously sharing" cultural traits in an environment of controlled contacts where all threats to individual self-esteem had been removed. In the literature of the ICW, this notion of sampling the exotic "gifts" of traditional cultures and appropriating those that are inoffensive to the themes of the core culture -- a sort of market orientation to the commodities of culture -- is supplemented by a concern to disembodify the cultural component from the "inner self" in order to penetrate to the least common denominator of shared values and beliefs. This assumption of the underlying unity of mankind, coupled with the conceptualization of culture as a removable garb of personality, reveals more about the belief systems and ideological defenses of the innovators of such programs than it does about the actual evidence of history and psychic reality. A two-edged sword maintaining that culture is superficial and only that which is universal is valid is used to justify tabooing behavior that does not conform to the wishes of the controlling group.

An important consequence of this thinking is that categories of deviance are created out of alternative modes of expression: those living up to the standards of unrecognized social groups are considered misfits or neurotics. As an example, consider the person who shows little apparent interest in the feelings or opinions of others. Is this person an impaired personality or are there cultural settings in which the violation of one cultural norm becomes the expression of another? There are cultural groups -- the Latin peoples are a case in point -- that favor interpersonal rather than group communications and emphasize the form rather than the content of the communication. To a person raised in such an

environment, the "democratic" process of sharing opinions and building a consensus over a period of time in a kind of geometric progression to the "truth" is rather incomprehensible. How many specimens of this type of individualism have been spiritually ostracized because they failed to submit to the stifling discipline of the "therapeutic" group?

As another illustration, take the person who meets intellectual challenges with heated defense or impassioned counter-attack. Is this individual revealing the tortured side of a troubled personality or is the person operating from a cultural framework that harnesses emotional energy in the expression of a point of view? Intellect and emotion are disjoined in some traditions but conjoined in others, and despite the occasional turbulence stirred up by such an individual whose style, if it is not chronically disruptive and idiosyncratic, should be accorded the status of cultural derivation.

A final example of a cultural-type frequently dismissed as deviant is the reticent person who shys away from debate or confrontation and who prefers silence to the advocacy of unpopular or high-risk points of view. Is it proper to draw this person out, to ask him to abandon his basic posture toward the world, to treat his reserve as an individual aberration unrelated to his cultural background? In some cultures it is important to maintain the surface harmony of human interaction, to protect the public image of a potential adversary, and to engage in descriptive rather than prescriptive discussions.

When people from these differing cultures are treated as "problems" for an intercultural group, it indicates that the cultural roots of their behavior are not properly understood or accepted. In each case, an analysis of each individual's particular communication style would be more productive for real intercultural understanding than the substantive issues whose consideration by the group revealed the existence of a plurality of participative styles.

CHANGING THE GROUND RULES

To bring about a more open climate in intercultural groups, we cannot be content to simply deepen our understanding of the variety of cultural types; we must also reexamine and reformulate the rules that have come to govern groups of this nature. In setting out such a path, we run the risk of pursuing the phantasm of total objectivity, or of enfeebling our efforts by dismantling structure altogether. Yet the drawbacks of the present culture-bound approach cry out for a recasting of our thought processes and a reconsideration of our current practices in the field. One widely-used formula in need of revision is the prescription for effective communication: self-disclosure - feedback - self-improvement. The self-disclosure called for by the devotees of "authenticity" springs from a kind of permissiveness in communication that is not sanctioned by the cultural codes of many social groups. Although such verbal strip-teases are evidence of the

thirst for intimacy of our times, it is erroneous to assume that all Americans crave an instantaneous and uncommitted interpersonal communion. For some individuals, such forms of expression may come naturally and effortlessly; for others, such short-order displays cause discomfort and pose a barrier to effective communication. It seems certain that communication can progress beyond idle chatter and pleasantries without violating a participant's sense of good taste and privacy. Where differences of approach exist within an intercultural group, the question of degree of involvement in a transitory group could be placed high on the agenda of common concerns.

Another doctrine of dubious validity is the belief in human brotherhood. This venerable and powerful myth, upon whose foundation a pyramid of ideals and expectations has been constructed, reinforces the efforts of sowers in the field of intercultural relations. Certainly this postulate contains a core of truth that will always remain valid and unshaken: that human beings share certain common needs and hopes, regardless of where they reside or what cultural temple they worship.

Unfortunately, the concept of human brotherhood suggests a unity of experience, perspective and purpose that is frequently lacking when people from different cultures meet and interact. This doctrine renders a disservice to intercultural understanding by leading participants in intercultural groups to underestimate the degree to which differences divide mankind. Crucial areas of disagreement or potential discord are overlooked in order to fulfill the prophecy of harmony contained in the brotherhood ideology. Conflict is defined as dysfunctional because it impedes the march toward a shared consciousness of unity. Only that which is common to all is viewed as lasting and legitimate. The brotherhood ideology discourages the search for differences, stifles the expression of opinion, diverts attention from process to goal, and dulls peoples' sensitivities to the difficulties of genuine intercultural understanding.

THE NEW INTERCULTURALISM

What are the positive features of a reconstructed program in intercultural communications? At this stage, it is impossible to give detailed specifications for such an endeavor since an adequate experimental base has not been constructed. The Minnesota experiment, however, shows usefulness of a general approach based on the pluralist view of American society and permits us to put forth the following principles as a guide for future activity:

- A. Place greater emphasis on the group-related identities of participants.
- B. Adjust the focus of interaction to reveal areas of difference as well as areas of likeness.

- C. Consider disorientation and conflict as functional outcomes of intercultural contact.
- D. Strive for the acceptance of group differences, not the acceptance of individuals despite group differences.

Group Theory of Personality

As an alternative to the view that personal growth is a function of an individual's liberation from unconscious group restraints and prejudices, let us explore the possibility that maturity is the consequence of the unfolding of an individual within the sustaining and supporting environment of the person's social group. In this view, the ego is the product of the groups that have nurtured or influenced it and cannot stand completely apart from the group matrix which it represents at any particular moment of time.³ This position is not clouded by the fact that consciousness of group identity is frequently minimal or non-existent in American society. An important aim of intercultural education is to cultivate the insight that behavior traits, previously assumed to be universal and absolute, are -- in reality -- localized and relative.

Stress on Differences

As long as the elusive goal of unity beguiled activists in the field of intergroup relations, the search for differences was short-circuited by the compulsion to confirm the brotherhood theory. No such ideologically-induced reluctance should hamper future efforts. Various techniques and methods that deliberately intensify the friction of cultural difference should be explored. An intercultural workshop should be existential in orientation, roaming freely over the terrain of group differences, reckoning both with the surface manifestations of difference and the "hidden" or "secret" realm of cultural diversity. The overriding aim of the intercultural workshop should not be to transcend differences; rather, as Rachel DuBois suggested, we should cultivate "the art of confrontation in the spirit of love."

Expectation of Conflict

Titillating encounters, love games and ethnic banquets are no substitutes for wrestling with the problem of how to live peacefully and harmoniously in a world beset with group suspicions and misunderstandings. An intercultural workshop where the volatile nature of group differences is not apparent is either tightly controlled by one cultural element or evading the task of confronting the darker forces in human nature. As Peter Adler has argued in the international context, culture "shock" should be considered a normal accompaniment to a person's initial exposure to culturally-derived difference.⁴

Such a state of disorientation with its symptoms of withdrawal, hostility, defensiveness, etc., is not a dysfunctional response to difference, but is the first stage on the long road toward intercultural understanding. We should anticipate such feelings and not leave the individual unaware of their purpose and potential. We should create a climate of creative tension in which the individual could react in positive ways.

The Goal of Co-existence

There are two complementary goals in human relations programming. The first goal, and the one that until now has seemed most compelling, is the realization of a shared humanity, despite accidents of birth or circumstance that consign us to different groups. This goal requires assent to the following proposition: because you are similar to me in your essential being, I accept you. The difficulty with this goal is that it is beyond the capacities and irrelevant to the life situations of many people. In numerous instances of intercultural contact in the real world, any healing potential created by consciousness of commonalities is erased by simultaneous awareness of deep and sometimes irreconcilable differences -- differences that shape the innermost being of the individual.

A second and more realistic goal is reached when a person believes: you are inherently different from me because you belong to a group whose way of life and path of collective self-realization are at variance with those of my group. Nonetheless, I respect the sincerity and integrity of the experiment in living in which you participate. What is expected of you is not expected of me; what is permitted you is not permitted me; and what is achieved by you is not achieved by me, and vice-versa. This does not mean that we can't learn from each other and join hands in common pursuits. It means that pluralism is a law of life and that there are many paths to ascend the summit of life, each with its own special challenges and rewards.

MECHANISM FOR MULTI-CULTURAL AMERICA

Sparked by the militancy of previously quiescent minorities, the United States is undergoing a major reappraisal of its self-image and historical development. If the pluralist critique is sound in formulation and enduring in consequence, it leads us to rectify areas of inequity in our society, to redefine our relationships with each other, and to readjust our institutions to reflect our multiple origins and loyalties. Various segments of American society are becoming more sensitive to the cultural determinants of behavior and to the programmatic imperatives this sensitivity creates. Naturally, receptivity to change varies among individuals and priorities vary from program to program. As an example, the need to shatter the myth of American cultural homogeneity may not seem so urgent in programs that recruit both American and foreign-born participants. Foreign students need to adapt to the dominant cultural patterns found on campus, and the

magnitude of that task -- building bridges to stimulate contacts and sympathy between American and foreign students -- may limit consideration of the variety and complexity of American sub-cultures. Yet even in this case, the motives of those who resist the kind of refinements discussed in this paper are open to suspicion. This is especially true if the brand of domestic cultural imperialism that led to the popularization of the American melting pot symbol as an ideological smokescreen for the destruction of minority cultures is, in a larger setting, the same impulse motivating those who seek to eradicate cultural differences on a world-wide scale through the covert imposition of the American core culture's values. Our credentials as purveyors of intercultural understanding are cast into doubt when we overlook the lessons of diversity in our own society.

While we have made significant strides in recognizing the needs of foreign students, we have so far failed to invent a mechanism to control the number and quality of sub-cultural contacts on the American campus. The influx of minority students has profoundly altered the situation in American higher education: they have shaken the control of entrenched groups, taken part in intergroup conflicts and, in the process of adapting to the university environment, have experienced identity problems of great severity. Beneath the uncanny calm of the current campus scene lies an undertow of conflicting currents and seething tensions.

For decades Jewish leaders have agonized over the dilemma of Jewish youth caught in the swirl of an alien and secular campus environment, disarmed against the challenges to Jewish tradition and values. Italian-Americans are awakening to similar problems. In a recent article, Richard Gambino wrote eloquently of the pain and pathos of thousands of young Italian-Americans who, with the advent of open-enrollment at the City University of New York, entered a bewildering campus environment lacking adequate counselling services and a sympathetic administrative and teaching staff.⁵ The special problems of Puerto Rican youth in higher education are recognized by a number of special service organizations established to provide support and counselling in each stage of the educational process. The Chicano and Native-American encounter with academia, especially in the Mid-West and Far West, has not been trouble-free for either the minority group members or the administrators who have had to contend with the special problems created by their presence.

The most far-reaching and controversial changes in American higher education have resulted from the entrance of Afro-Americans on the university scene. Their presence has a leavening effect, catalyzing basic challenges to traditional programs and infecting other groups with similar enthusiasms. The most radical innovation inspired by Afro-Americans has been the establishment of black studies departments to serve their

special needs and interests.

Other groups have imitated the black strategy and courses or departments in Chicano culture, Native-American studies, Polish studies, etc., are increasingly common in American higher education. Students from diverse cultural backgrounds are discovering their roots and experiencing a sense of pride in their ancestral traditions. Whether a nostalgic longing for the past or an effort to grapple with a neglected reality in their lives, such feelings have had, and will apparently continue to have, profound repercussions on university life.

The proliferation of separate courses and departments has had one unfortunate side-effect: it has led to a growing fragmentation of university life, a curtailment of creative contacts between educated Americans of varied backgrounds. This is not to deny the need for such programs; it only suggests the complementary need of bringing individuals from diverse backgrounds together in an institutionalized setting of authentic cultural democracy. The experimental program of the Minnesota Project on Ethnic America is designed to accomplish this objective: to demarcate a common ground acceptable to the diverse groups in American society. If the task it has assumed lies beyond the capacities of human beings to fully accomplish, it is hoped that, at least, a modest contribution will have been made to the cause of intergroup harmony.

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Nicholas Montalto of Brooklyn, New York, was the coordinator of the Minnesota Program. He has been interested in cross-cultural interaction both in the international and domestic context for a number of years. Mr. Montalto is currently writing a history of intercultural education programs in American public schools from 1924-1954.

Footnotes

1. The philosophy and techniques of the Workshop for Cultural Democracy were first detailed in: Rachel Davis DuBois, Get Together Americans (New York: 1943).
2. One widely-circulated manual exemplifying this neglect is: Edward Steward, American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective (Pittsburgh: Regional Council for International Education, 1971).
3. A theoretical defense of this point of view appears in: Richard Kolm, "Ethnicity and Society: A Theoretical Analysis and Its Implications for the United States," (Rockville, MD: Center for Studies of Metropolitan Problems, National Institute of Mental Health, 1971, mimeographed).
4. Peter Adler, "Cultural Shock and the Cross-Cultural Learning Experience," in David S. Hoopes, ed., Readings in Intercultural Communications, Vol. II (Pittsburgh: Regional Council for International Education, 1972).
5. Richard Gambino, "The Lonely Italian-American," The Village Voice, June 7, 1973.

The Institute on Pluralism and Group Identity believes that if America is to survive as a healthy, pluralistic nation we must respond to the needs of individuals who identify as members of groups and give attention to the broad spectrum of group agendas. At the same time, every precaution must be taken to assure that competing group demands do not deteriorate into polarization, negativism or destructive group chauvinism.

An outgrowth of the National Project on Ethnic America, the Institute's aim is to bring the social sciences and the humanities into closer contact with the values and life styles of America's diverse groupings. We concentrate on developing effective links between scholars, practitioners, government officials and constituencies; formulating new policies and programs related to group status, group identity and group diversity; and publishing and disseminating materials designed to foster better understanding.

It is our belief that the goals of promoting the common good and developing cooperation and coalition are best achieved by recognizing diversity rather than ignoring it.

Our WORKING PAPERS series provides a platform for various people to express their personal viewpoints. While the Institute may not always agree with the ideas expressed in these papers, we feel they merit public attention.